

Blasting ‘weak-kneed’ skeptics, Tories fan out to plug EU trade deal

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The Harper government’s PR machine will be working overtime Friday as 40 per cent of the Conservative cabinet fans out across the country to shore up support for a free trade deal with the European Union.

Fifteen cabinet ministers, three MPs and a senator will stage 18 separate events throughout Canada to play up the benefits of further opening this country’s markets to the 27-member EU bloc.

The Conservatives kicked off the public relations campaign Friday morning with an Ottawa speech by International Trade Minister Ed Fast to the Economic Club of Canada.

“Trade is not for skeptics or scoffers. It’s not for the weak-kneed or faint of heart,” Mr. Fast told his business audience.

He said businesspeople are “courageous risk-takers” who see the value of free trade, but added that there are some Canadians who can’t be counted on to support making it easier for foreign companies to win market share in this country.

“Sadly, there are still those who lack your vision. They are the anti-trade activists who find great joy in spreading misinformation about trade and its role as a key driver of economic growth,” Mr. Fast said.

He attacked those who warn about the risks of lowering trade barriers in Canada, saying they were proved wrong in opposing the North American free trade agreement.

“They trot out the same falsehoods that they trotted out during the NAFTA negotiations, a generation ago,” he said. “They were wrong back then, and they’re wrong today.”

Anticipating criticism of the deal, which could force new competition on

some Canadian sectors, the Tories are trying to inoculate themselves against a public backlash.

The Conservatives also hope to wedge public divisions over the deal in their favour and will paint NDP Leader Tom Mulcair's concerns over the pact as a risk to economic growth.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised in the 2011 election campaign that they would seal a free trade deal with the European Union in 2012. It's the world's biggest economy with over 500 million consumers and annual economic output of more than \$17-trillion.

The talks are entering the later and most difficult stage where the thorniest subjects are up for negotiation.

Denmark's Trade Minister said earlier this week that three quarters of the deal is finalized and there's hope a deal could be struck within six months.

Canada's heavily-sheltered dairy, eggs and poultry sector is an obstacle to a more ambitious deal.

The European Union isn't looking to force Canada to abandon its protections for these farm commodities but it is hoping Ottawa can grant it more tariff-free or low-tariff access to the dairy market.

Only then would it grant Canadian beef farmers, for instance, significantly better access to European markets.

The proposed Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement would cover not only goods – the average industrial tariff in world trade today has already been cut to 4 per cent – but investment flows, services such as education and health care and government purchasing at the provincial and municipal.

Final ratification of the deal however will face serious opposition in the Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria.

Canada is facing pressure to [remove visa requirements](#) for visitors from those countries – controls it slapped in place to deter waves of

Roma asylum seekers.

In the last six years Canada has concluded trade agreements with nine countries as the Harper government adopted an every-bit-counts approach to opening new markets including Iceland and Panama.

The Conservatives have yet to sign a major trade deal, however, and talks underway to strike agreements with the European Union and India will be major tests of its ability to secure new opportunities for Canadian business.

Global efforts to sign a multi-country deal through the World Trade Organization have stumbled since 2003 and in recent years individual countries have instead hurried to ink one-one-one agreements that give each other special access to their markets.

Like many governing parties before, the Conservatives have been intent on boosting non-U.S. trade so Canada is not so heavily dependent on one market. They're also trying to stay ahead in the worldwide race to clinch special trade arrangements; global talks to accomplish the same thing on a broad basis have foundered for years.

The Conservative government takes every effort it can to attack the NDP of being anti-trade and obstructionist, saying its concerns over trade liberalization deals would "stall growth, kill jobs and set Canadian families back."

The Tories can't really complain of obstructionism in Parliament by the NDP now that the Harper government controls the Commons and, effectively, the Senate.

The Tories can use their majority powers – 166 seats – to limit and curb debate on any bill they want passed.